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Baggett & Walls, GOOD GOD: THE THEISTIC FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY

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Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality, by David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls. Oxford University Press, 2011. 283 pages. $99.00 (cloth), $24.95 (paper).

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David Baggett and Jerry Walls announce that this is to be both an academic book and one intended for a general audience, and that its aims will be to show that moral considerations lead us to believe in God, and to defend a certain kind of theistic worldview and theistic ethics. On the whole, it's a good book, and I recommend it.

The authors are Anselmians and Arminians, and they have strong sympathies with C. S. Lewis, Plantinga and the later MacIntyre. They believe in divine command theory of a sort that avoids the problems of Ockhamistic voluntarism by identifying God with the good. They hold that morality points to God, and that God makes sense of morality. Their hope is to defend these views and so to move us beyond the question of whether or not God exists to the issue of how to become personally more acquainted with the character and goodness of God. "Morality, ultimately, for the Christian, is all about relationship, first and foremost with God, and then secondarily with others" (186).

These are big things to write about with both clarity and precision for a general audience. Bearing that in mind, the biggest flaw in the book is quite understandable: the tone and accessibility of the book is not consistent. Their voice changes, and often they write in the language of the guild, shifting away from the kind of lucidity that otherwise would appeal to a general audience. Also, at first blush, some of the problems they address may not be appealing to a general audience. For instance, one chapter is dedicated to advancing their version of Arminianism over against other Reformed views. They write that "both Calvin and Luther wished to say that God's will trumps. This was a crucial mistake because philosophically it's indefensible" (75). For some readers, that kind of claim and its defense will no doubt be extremely interesting, and it does serve the aims of the book by helping to explain their view of God's goodness. But this chapter may seem irrelevant or even distasteful to those outside the Calvin/Arminius debate, as when they open the condescending rhetorical spigots for sentences like these: "Calvinists insist on defining sovereignty as all-encompassing divine determinism; anything less than his micromanagerial and meticulous providence is unworthy of the greatness of his sovereign power. . . .Loving God with all of one's mind demands a more credible theology than Calvinism can offer" (78–79).

Still, a slower reading shows that it is often the case that they accomplish broad goals while intending to attack narrow problems. This apparently narrow Calvin/Arminius debate serves the more general purpose of arguing that philosophy does indeed have a role to play in thinking about the goodness of God. There is also a second benefit to this debate:

their discussion of the philosophical problems of compatibilism may be directed towards Calvinists, but they subtly suggest that it applies equally to those naturalists who, as compatibilists, see no problem with affirming both materialist determinism and freedom, or to those who attempt to resolve the problem by hand-waving and misdirecting euphemisms.

Baggett and Walls often prove to be broad and generous readers of their adversaries. For example, Dawkins claims that the God of the Bible commits and commands so many atrocities that God cannot be morally good. Baggett and Walls respond with sympathy: Dawkins, they urge, correctly perceives that "character is key." His error lies not in his first principles, but in his method: he misunderstands the character of God by poor sampling of the data, "as if a perusal of the periphery yields more insight than an examination of the core" of God's character. The issue is not acquiescence to an existential proposition but the work of gaining familiarity with that which exists: "If God is real, then we must strive not for mere propositional knowledge or justified belief *that* God exists but a personal acquaintance with the God who *does* exist" (50).

And there is the crux of the book. The whole book is a modern attempt to solve a version of the Euthyphro problem. The solution is not found merely theoretically, at the periphery. Rather, by coming to know God, and what God is like, we will come to see its solution. Knowledge of God will mean knowing the basis on which moral obligations rest. Baggett and Walls insist that we need to know more than the social dimension of moral obligations, that in addition to epistemic understanding of the social function of the good we need an ontological understanding of it as well. That ontological knowledge boils down (at the risk of oversimplifying) to the identity of God and of the good, so that "God is good" is both predication and identity (126). So the two aims of the book (defending theistic ethics and showing that moral considerations lead to theism) are difficult to separate from one another. Their view is that because God is identical with the good, God cannot command us to do what is not good. This overcomes the "Ockhamistic" (read: voluntaristic) problem that may be entailed by divine command theory.

Of course, there are still problems with this view. They attempt to clarify their position by insisting that "what God can't do is anything in diametric opposition, irremediable tension, or patent conflict with our most nonnegotiable moral commitments." That sounds strong, but I don't think it solves more problems than it creates. If we were attempting to get away from postmodern moral relativism by appealing to God, this seems to make our moral imagination a limit on God's action and identity. But it is not clear how such an appeal to our moral sentiments avoids the postmodern problem. They answer that "philosophers from Aristotle to Kant have recognized that a certain vagueness in ethics is unavoidable" (135). The test of ethical plausibility then seems to be whether or not one "can imagine a conjunction of divine perfection [and a given moral command]" (136). Okay, then why posit that vagueness or imaginability here, rather

than at an earlier junction, like when engaging in moral reasoning prior to doing theology? Why not prefer a more pragmatic or phenomenological ethic and skip some of these problems that seem like a significant distraction from getting down to the business of doing the good rather than disputing about the ontology of the good?

Perhaps the strongest answer to this question comes in chapter 8, one of their most solid and interesting chapters. There the authors go to bat against "unfriendly atheism," i.e., the view that belief in God is not permissible because such belief is irrational. Baggett and Walls are not merely exploring a possible view about ethics; they are defending the right to believe. Or, as they put it in chapter 9, "The right ultimate view of reality is plausibly the one that will be most likely to produce the right analysis of the relationship between morality and rationality" (172). In other words, the right view of God will lead to a world that makes sense.

The authors hold that naturalism necessarily leads to determinism. On the one hand, I'm inclined to agree that this seems the likeliest possibility, but I also note that many naturalists insist that it simply ain't so. Some naturalists, like Peirce and Bergson, suggest that the conditions of spiritual freedom might arise out of nature. But I think that Baggett and Walls have in mind in particular naturalists like Dennett, whose case for an emergent freedom often seems to amount to something like a case for merely *apparent* freedom. That case boils down to a wallpapered version of Crick's "astonishing hypothesis," in which we are all "just a pack of neurons" whose function is to invent clever little words like "freedom" and then to act like we believe these clever little words. If, as I think, Baggett and Walls are really concerned with these latter sorts of naturalists, then not only do Baggett and Walls appear to be right, but it becomes clear that their concern in this book is not merely epistemic. What's really at stake here is nothing short of everything. As they point out in chapter 4, "If God exists, he's not just one more item in the inventory of reality, but the key to understanding the whole" (80).

And this is one of the great strengths of the book. It is not merely a book about the theory of ethics. It's really a book about everything, and its authors seem motivated by the idea that everything in fact matters. As a pragmatist, I can't say that I can prove them right, but I can say that I prefer the consequences of their belief to many of its alternatives.

Despite my appreciation for their position, I am not convinced they are completely fair to some of their philosophical opponents. In the first chapter, for instance, they critique a straw man who bears a lot of resemblance to Sartre, but not enough to be convincing. While it is true that Sartre is deeply skeptical about finding transcendent "values or commands to legitimize our conduct," that does not leave him in the position of endorsing all conduct whatsoever, nor does it leave the Sartrean in the position of the immoralist. Sartre's critique of transcendence is not simply aimed at undermining ethics but at underscoring human moral freedom and moral responsibility, and at drawing attention to the importance of

intersubjectivity (and so of the people we encounter) over against the potentially idolatrous worship of moral abstractions. Abstractions can become fierce gods, and they sometimes demand human sacrifice. In this and later chapters, their construals of the positions of Plato and Ockham are similarly subject to criticism. Still, I think we can cut Baggett and Walls a good deal of slack. They are not arguing against Ockham the man, but against a view they have identified as Ockhamism, and if they have failed to include in this criticism all possible versions of Ockhamism, their criticisms of this version are keen and instructive. The same goes for their presentation of the Euthyphro problem. Those of us who spend our lives in Plato's texts might not recognize their explanation of the problem from the eponymous dialogue, but we can nevertheless look at the problem they do address with admiration of their philosophical insight and rigor. To their credit, they make a small nod in the direction of Sartrean intersubjectivity in chapter 5 when putting (a little) distance between themselves and the moral arguments of William Lane Craig (100).

This book has a clear aim, and a clear trajectory, and watching Baggett and Walls follow that trajectory is instructive and rewarding. While I am not certain that they succeed in making their argument as simple or as accessible as they had hoped, the book has the great strength of giving us a fresh and serious look at a topic that might matter more than anything else.

The Poetics of Evil: Towards an Aesthetic Theodicy, by Philip Tallon. Oxford University Press, 2012. xx + 251 pages. $74.00 (hardcover).

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As the title of his book indicates, Tallon seeks to restore an aesthetic dimension in Christian approaches to the problem of evil. However, rather than placing them alongside moral considerations where the aesthetic inevitably comes a poor second, he suggests that it be thought more in terms of Eleonore Stump's second person perspective, insights that can enrich the believing Christian's understanding of the nature of the divine creation. To that end, Tallon's discussion proceeds by three stages, taking in turn the traditional harmony argument (with good balancing evil) and then the issue of tragedy before turning finally to more recent discussions of "horrors."

Tallon's interest in the first issue appears to have taken its rise from dissatisfaction with Barth's familiar remark that the music of Mozart enabled him to hear "the whole context of providence." The balance of light and shade emerges, Tallon suggests, much more clearly in many another composer, and indeed Irenaeus's more dynamic, symphonic understanding is better than Augustine's essentially static picture. Yet it is Augustine who is defended at length from a number of critiques, including the claim of